

Title: Rereading Havel's *Power of the Powerless*  
Author: David S. Danaher, University of Wisconsin-Madison

In the United States, *Power of the Powerless* is arguably Havel's most well-known text: it is required reading in many courses in History and Political Science as one of the most influential "dissident" essays ever written. As such, it is read primarily as an essay about a specific socio-historical context.

I will argue that this approach represents a fundamental misreading of *Power*. A reading that primarily historicizes cannot situate the essay comfortably within Havel's oeuvre as a whole, nor is it how Havel asks that *Power* be read. While the essay is grounded in a specific socio-historical context, its meaning – as Havel makes clear – is not reducible to that particular context. *Power* is much less about politics in totalitarian Czechoslovakia than it is about human identity in the modern world.

The humanities-oriented reading that I propose takes Havel at face value in emphasizing the existential level of his analysis and in exploring how and why *Power* is as much about *us* as it was about *them*.

For the purposes of this paper, my focus will fall on Havel's systematic redefinition of *ideology* as an existential phenomenon. How does Havel metaphorize ideology? What does it mean to understand ideology as a way of being characteristic of the modern age rather than as a set of political beliefs? To what extent is Havel's analysis applicable to contemporary America?

My approach is informed by existing critical treatments of *Power* (eg, Keane and Tucker) as well as by Goldfarb's work on the "post-totalitarian mind".

### **Works Cited**

- Goldfarb, J. 1991. *Beyond Glasnost: The Post-Totalitarian Mind*.  
Keane, J. 2000. *Václav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts*.  
Tucker, A. 2000. *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka to Havel*.